Woman's

Woman's Union Missionary Society

WOMAN'S LIFE IN INDIA

By Miss RODERICK

I am going to try and give a sketch of girl-life among the Bengalis, and I must begin by describing the native dwellings,—homes I will not call them, for in the first place there is no such word in their language, and in the next, a Bengali dwelling knows nothing of the comforts of a home. The street-door has a chain for fastening it on the outside, and as the inside is usually bolted if the men are away from the house, callers find it convenient to use the chain as a knocker. Another mode of gaining admittance, is to shout, and ask if anybody is at home, for visiting cards are unknown? From the street-door you enter the outer court, but if space is limited, and the house does not have one, the street-door opens into a small passage with a platform built of brick on either side of it, and not unfrequently is seen stretched on one of these, tightly wrapped from head to foot in a white sheet, the figure of a man; this is the door-keeper, and if he wakes, will get up and make you a profound salaam.

AN INSIDE VIEW.

On one side of the hall is the sitting-room of the men of the house, and it is the only room that has a carpet, which is usually of

Indian manufacture, a thick cotton stuff woven in stripes, in appearance like American rag carpets. This is placed on mats, and to keep it from soiling, a cotton sheet is spread over it. Large round bolsters also covered with white are arranged along the walls, to support the back when sitting on the floor. The women folks *never enter* this room when the men are in it. There is no particular sitting room for the women, but as the houses of India are built with verandas around the inner court, these inner rooms are appropriated by the women, who come out during the cooler part of the day. From the narrow entrance passage just described, which answers for a hall in a Bengali dwelling, access may be gained to the inner court, where the woman's domain begins, but if any of her husband's relations older than he happen to come in, she vanishes into one of the rooms before he can almost get a glimpse of her; if she had not time to hide herself from his sight, she turns her back and draws her saree over her face.

In the bedrooms no carpets are to be seen. A bit of carpet near the bed is suggestive of feet being wiped before going to bed, a necessary caution, as after the age of ten, a girl is not allowed to wear shoes and stockings. The bedroom is particularly stifling, but that is easily accounted for, for every window, and they are not very large, is fast closed, and the entrance door has a fine bamboo screen before it to keep out flies, and so the pure air of heaven in vain tries to find admittance. As the bedrooms are small, half of the room is taken up by a large, showy, wooden bedstead with curtains, the favorite color being green with scollops of Turkey red all around the top, and a border of the same below. The whole appears dingy with age and lack of neatness. Sheets and pillowslips are used, and their bright colored quilts have also white covers to them. Great chests contain the family wardrobe, jewels and money.

KITCHEN AND COOKERY.

The kitchen, for a wonder, has a cared-for appearance, the floors and the lower part of the walls being smeared every day with fuller's earth. All the brass cooking utensils and plate, shine like gold on the low square wooden stool which is used in place of a dresser. A Bengali house-wife is proud of her cooking; she knows nothing of baked bread, but she prepares for her family a small cake of wheaten flour fried in melted butter, which she calls "*loochees*," and which she serves as she cooks them to ensure their being hot; but rice is the chief food of the Bengalis. Puddings are unknown, but "sweets," mostly of cream or curds and sugar, take their place. A favorite dish is curds rolled into balls and fried in melted butter and then dropped into a thick syrup. Table manners are not observed, meals are partaken while seated on a carpet with the dishes on the bare floor. At dinner or breakfast a large dish of rice is placed before each person, around which are placed a number of tiny cups and dishes containing the various curries and lentil soup.

THE CHILDREN.

Bengali babies are to be pitied; their wardrobe consists of a few garments like short primitive night-dresses, and one dress for best. In nearly every house is to be seen a low cot or swinging cradle in which the baby takes its mid-day nap. Within the last few years it has been thought necessary by the Bengalis to educate their daughters, but they are not yet willing to spend any money for it. The old system was to train girls to be house-wives, not scholars, though tradition gives a few names of women who attained to great eminence as such. Bengali girls are quick at learning, and it is not their fault when they arrive at the age of womanhood only partially educated, for, if allowed to attend school, they can only do so up to the age of ten, for at that age they are married, and then, if of high

caste, on no account appear in public. In character the Bengali girl is gentle and quiet, pleasant and graceful in manner, and loveable on the whole.

NATIVE DRESS.

A Bengali woman's dress is pretty and graceful. She loves jewelry, even the poorest wear some articles which are hoarded up to be given as dowries to daughters or to descend to heirs. A girl's bridal-dress is of red silk and gold brocade, a few jasmine blossoms are threaded together and fixed on the part of the saree that is drawn over the head. After the ceremony the bride's face is shown to the guests, and the men present have the privilege of seeing it.

NO HOPE IN DEATH.

After death no loving memorial is reared in memory of the departed. The body is carried by the nearest relatives for cremation to the banks of a river, and the ashes are thrown into it. The religion of their forefathers, which they cling to so blindly, has no comfort for them when the hand of death casts its dread shadow over a household:

"And are they dust and dust must we become?
Or are they living in some unknown clime?
Shall we regain them in that far off home?
And live anew beyond the waves of time?"

These doleful lines best express the hopeless yearnings of a Hindu woman. How privileged we should feel if we can rescue one soul, to see the light of the Gospel, which will lead them to live in the glorious hope of a life of immortality with Him who has redeemed us from sin and death.

Into such homes as described by one of its missionaries, the Woman's Union Missionary Society has been at work. Organized in 1860, it was the first society of women in America to open the *Zenanas* of India. Increasing year after year, it is represented in Calcutta, Allahahad, Cawnpore and Jhansi by its Zenana schools, Orphanages and medical work. Does it not seem a privilege to you to help its growth and efficiency by your gifts and prayers ?

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